

A HISTORY OF MARXIST HEGEMONY: From Plekhanov to Gramsci



ABSTRACT

Hegemony, as popularized by Antonio Gramsci, has earned great importance in Marxist debates over the conquest of power. Unsurprisingly, this has also led to a renewed exploration of its origins in the writings of Vladimir Lenin, Georgi Plekhanov, and even Karl Kautsky as argued by the historian Lars Lih. This paper examines that history by returning to their original writings and contemporary analysis by Grigory Zinoviev. In doing so, I demonstrate a fundamental break between the original "strategy" of hegemony found in earlier theorists and Lenin's "theory" of hegemony as elaborated upon by Gramsci.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of all revolutionary and transformative ideologies, the question of gaining power is a constant. Marxism is no stranger to this matter, and with each passing generation, the yearning for an answer has only burned hotter. For Marxists, there are few topics within this broader question which can claim greater importance and contention than that of political consciousness: what can arise “spontaneously” simply by natural struggles under capitalism, what has to be taught by an organization, what sort of organizations are best suited to this or that lesson, etc. It is in this context that the notion of hegemony enters the scene.

Hegemony is simply the concept of leadership, specifically of politico-ideological leadership. That is to say, it is the idea of one “group” being trusted by another in their perspective of how things work and what must be done about that in the field of politics. One may find that this most basic foundation stretches from Georgii Plekhanov to Antonio Gramsci.¹ In this regard, the term was first actually used by Pavel Axelrod, but he was merely giving a word to something which had already been elaborated upon by Plekhanov.² It is already easy enough to see how confused the history of the idea may become given this fact.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that there is no firm consensus on that history. If one were to ask Gramsci, hegemony truly begins with Lenin, but the historians who investigate this matter cannot seem to fully grasp how.³ Whether that is the simple confusion of some New Left era historians as noted by Alan Shandro or, more recently, the reduction of Lenin’s conception of hegemony to a strategy specifically relating to the bourgeois-democratic revolution as argued by Lars Lih, is hard to say.⁴ This does make for a curious claim on the part of Gramsci as Plekhanov obviously comes first in proposing such a strategy.

If, however, one looks back to Lenin’s contemporaries, Gramsci’s claim of an original theoretical contribution becomes far more

sensible again. When writing his history of the party, Grigorii Zinoviev featured hegemony extensively. Not only for the early question of the bourgeois revolution, but as a universal matter applying to all existing governments and aspiring revolutionary movements. When doing so, he wrote of both Plekhanov and Lenin as “founders.”⁵ One may suspect this to be a mere political trick, yet Zinoviev refers to specific examples of the incomplete nature of Plekhanov’s arguments when compared to Lenin’s.

By incomplete, I mean to say that Plekhanov’s writings on hegemony are of a purposefully narrow definition applied to very specific circumstances. As I will explain later, Plekhanov had a “strategy” of hegemony in which the workers would lead a bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia. By contrast, Gramsci presents a more universal “theory” of hegemony, one in which these ideas about leadership apply between all classes under all circumstances. The confusion which I initially referred to lies in the consensus failure to distinguish between the two and the failure to appreciate that Lenin created the distinction.

The purpose of this paper is thus to investigate whether Lenin was merely continuing with Plekhanov’s formula or if he had made some meaningfully innovative break as suggested by Gramsci. Otherwise, Lenin may be reduced, as Lih essentially argues, to little more than an Erfurtian—someone basing their political strategy around the German Social Democratic Party’s (SPD) Erfurt program as interpreted by Karl Kautsky—in Russia.⁶ Even more measured writings still place Lenin as an acolyte of Plekhanov or as an unwitting practitioner of “Gramscian hegemony.”⁷ In order to get to the truth of the matter, I first analyze the two more clearly distinct theorists in Plekhanov and Gramsci. Afterwards, I turn to Lenin, clear delineations in hand, so as to correct the current consensus denying his “original and creative contribution” to Marxism.

II. PLEKHANOV AND HEGEMONY

For the simple reason of chronology, I find it best to begin with Plekhanov’s conception of hegemony. Some revealing remarks are most clearly revealed in his polemic against Lev Tikhomirov, who,

- 1 Georgii Plekhanov, “Speech at the International Workers’ Socialist Congress in Paris,” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1981), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1889/07/speech.html>; Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volume 1*, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (Columbia University Press, 1992).
- 2 Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? In Context* (Haymarket Books, 2008), 109.
- 3 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volume 2*, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (Columbia University Press, 1996), 187.
- 4 Alan Shandro, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony: Political Practice and Theory in the Class Struggle* (Brill Academic Pub, 2014), 4; Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 98.

- 5 Grigorii Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party: A Popular Outline*, trans. R. Chappell (New Park Publications, 1974), 35.
- 6 Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 113–14.
- 7 Shandro, *Logic of Hegemony*, 3–5.



at the time, was a Narodnik.⁸ Narodniks followed an ideology which believed in a peasant-led revolution for socialism. This fact must be kept in mind when one considers how Plekhanov seems to skip between the overthrow of capitalism and the unification of anti-Tsarist forces. Without worrying about such matters right now, we can see that Plekhanov identifies the proletariat as the “hegemonic class.”

What does he say of the hegemonic class? It will pursue revolutionary social upheaval, and it shall do so by specific means. Those means are uniting the peasants and anti-Tsarist forces. But we must remember Plekhanov’s earliest words on this matter: The revolution against the tsar—which is to say, the bourgeois democratic revolution—can only triumph if it is a movement of the proletariat. Thus, he proclaims a movement led by the workers but dependent upon exercising an ideological influence over other classes. With that, we have the basic idea of hegemony: ideological leadership of one class with regard to another.

If it was not clear by now, Plekhanov’s concern with this leadership is its use as a weapon against Tsarism. When he spoke of the revolutionary movement in 1889, he was not referring to the ultimate goal of socialism and proletarian dictatorship. Plekhanov was speaking specifically of “storming the stronghold of autocracy,”⁹ the practical meaning of which is made all the clearer when one reviews his previously written political program.¹⁰ This part is not distinct. The “strategy of hegemony” held by all Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was proletarian leadership over the other classes to enact a truly democratic revolution.

What I would argue is distinct, and must be recalled later, is that Plekhanov’s concern with hegemony ends after this point. For Plekhanov, a strategy of alliances ceases to be relevant for the future socialist revolution. When it comes to the urban petty bourgeoisie, the reasons are obvious enough that they do not need to be elaborated. Yet one might recall the multifaceted sentence from before, where he speaks of the peasantry just after speaking of the proletariat’s destiny in overthrowing capitalism. These are very separate concepts, and the comma means everything. Not only are the peasantry grouped with other “opposition elements,” like the democratic petty bourgeoisie, in it, but a broader reading of Plekhanov also contains constant remarks

8 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 36–37.

9 Plekhanov, “Speech.”

10 Georgii Plekhanov, “Second Draft Programme of the Russian Social-Democrats,” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, trans. Julius Katzer (Progress Publishers, 1974), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1887/xx/sdelg2.htm>.

about the inability of the peasantry to be a supportive force for the eventual socialist revolution.¹¹

What if one were to ask Plekhanov what must be done to bring about the socialist revolution? He would say that capitalism must come about and rise to maturity with all its contradictions and proletarians.¹² Considering his thoughts on the peasantry, we know this is because Plekhanov is depending on the emergence of a much larger proletarian class. It cannot simply be a matter of contending with bourgeois democracy itself. Otherwise, there would have been no need for Plekhanov’s alignment with the Mensheviks in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. This is a matter which has been thoroughly elaborated upon by other historians, so for the purposes of this paper, it is enough to say that Plekhanov did not believe in a socialist revolution based on the strategy of hegemony.¹³

III. GRAMSCI AND HEGEMONY

Setting Plekhanov aside, we come to Gramsci. Gramsci argues that “political hegemony” can and must precede the seizure of power.¹⁴ When describing this dynamic for a would-be ruling class, he clearly describes it as a matter of “leading allied classes.”¹⁵ Thus, Gramsci outlines the most foundational concept in alignment with Plekhanov: a “scenario” or “strategy” of hegemony, in which power is seized by one class exercising ideological leadership over others. Most immediately, Gramsci gives the example of the bourgeois Jacobins with regards to the urban workers and rural peasantry.¹⁶

Yet Gramsci is not concerned exclusively with the bourgeoisie leading a bourgeois revolution. He just as easily applies these terms and considerations to the proletariat and to the scenario of a socialist revolution.¹⁷ This is not a one-off concern either—in fact, the essence of

11 Shandro, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony*, 90. The original writing is unavailable to me, so it is necessary to depend upon Shandro.

12 Georgii Plekhanov, “Our Differences,” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, trans. Andrew Rothstein, A. Fineberg, and R. Dixon (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1885), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1885/ourdif/index.html>.

13 Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford University Press, 1963).

14 Gramsci, *Volume 1*, 137.

15 Gramsci, *Volume 1*, 136.

16 Gramsci, *Volume 1*, 148.

17 Gramsci, *Volume 2*, 41.



Gramsci's critique is of historic revolutionary strategy. Modern society is one which requires a complex battle for ideological influence found in the "trenches of civil society," which requires an "unprecedented concentration of hegemony," though further elaborations on the "war of position" are beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁸ Suffice to say, a hegemony-based analysis is indispensable to Gramsci in all revolutionary matters.

It is for such broad application that Gramsci earlier saw fit to speak in the general terms of what a ruling class requires, rather than to specifically say what the bourgeoisie required to rule, because his formula is for the state, not for a specific state, just as his formula is one for revolution, not just the bourgeois revolution or any other particular kind.¹⁹ Hegemony for Gramsci is thus a universal concept. The battle for leadership is a constant question for all classes and all periods of state and revolution.

We can now observe rather clearly where Gramsci may be said to break with Plekhanov on the question of hegemony. It is not their basic definition, which aligns perfectly well with the idea of ideological leadership of one class over another. Rather, it is the extent to which one considers the matter applicable. Plekhanov may be said to have a strategy of hegemony in the bourgeois revolution. On the other hand, Gramsci has a theory of hegemony meant to be applied to all investigations of society and class conflict, including even the proletariat and any incumbent ruling class.²⁰ Thus, the question of the paper is fully and clearly posed: Did Lenin have a universal theory of hegemony as Gramsci claimed?

IV. LENIN AND HEGEMONY

Both Lih and Shandro have thoroughly demonstrated Lenin's commitment to the strategy of hegemony as applied to the bourgeois revolution. By their arguments, Zinoviev's basic claim of Lenin's intertwinement with the concept is, as far as we need be concerned, without dispute. Furthermore, they give no reason to believe that his definition of hegemony, which aligns so well with the one observed

in this paper, was in some way dramatically different from Lenin's.²¹ This leaves us exactly where one wishes to be, in asking if that is where the matter stopped for Lenin. Did he alternatively consider the matter applicable to socialist revolution, the proletariat, and the general topic of the state? That is to say, was he a mere adopter of Plekhanov's strategy or instead the founder of the Gramscian theory I just explained?

In justifying his placement of Lenin alongside Plekhanov as founder of hegemony, Zinoviev already begins to point us in the right direction of alliance with the peasantry.²² From the practical standpoint of even the bourgeois revolution, it would seem necessary to have such an alliance—one which Lenin had advocated since 1894.²³ This confirms the beginnings of separation between Plekhanov and Lenin on the bourgeois revolution, something wholly reaffirmed by his position in the 1905 Revolution as taken directly against the Mensheviks.²⁴ Yet this does not necessarily imply anything about the prospect of socialist revolution, or the broader mechanics of class rule in society.

In that same 1894 essay, however, Lenin put this question to rest in plain text.²⁵ It is impossible here not to observe the exact same formula of dictatorship of workers and peasants that was declared in 1917—the very formula which was advanced for the socialist revolution led by the Bolsheviks. The very formula which was again reaffirmed by the party at its congresses and insisted upon by Lenin even when it seemed a secondary matter.²⁶ Even if it was ultimately only the proletariat which could meet the full demands of history, their need to lead other classes in revolution applied just as much to this final task as it did the preceding one. Lenin did not think it necessary to have capitalism mature until one would speak only of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie as Plekhanov had argued.

Just as notably, at no point did Lenin think these calculations came to a stop at all. The Lenin of 1917 viewed the matter with all the same importance even after the revolution. *The State and Revolution* bears the exact same logic.²⁷ This is exactly the idea of hegemony, the ideological leadership of one class over another. Yet again, here Lenin

21 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 35.

22 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 135.

23 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 66.

24 Vladimir Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (Foreign Language Press, 2021), 109–10.

25 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 38.

26 Vladimir Lenin, "The Trade Unions, the Present Situation and Trotsky's Mistakes," in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Progress Publishers, 1965), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/dec/30.htm>.

27 Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, trans. Robert Service (Penguin Classics, 1993), 25.

18 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volume 3*, trans. Joseph Buttigieg (Columbia University Press, 2007), 161; Gramsci, *Volume 3*, 109; Gramsci, *Volume 1*, 218.

19 Gramsci, *Volume 3*, 75.

20 Gramsci, *Volume 3*, 20.



directly says that such leadership is for the sake of organizing a socialist economy. At all turns, he applies the ideas of hegemony to revolutions both bourgeois and socialist—to conditions of revolution as much as conditions of wielding state power.

One must recall as well that Lenin is not making this argument in the relatively narrow context of Russia either, as Plekhanov had seemed to. In the surrounding passages, he is elaborating constantly on the words of Marx with regard to the Paris Commune.²⁸ Just as importantly, Lenin goes out of his way to give a broad role to the analysis which he is conducting in these chapters.²⁹ They are for a total correction against what he views as erroneous developments on Marxist ideas about the state. Just as it would be wrong not to approach society in Russia through an expansive lens of hegemony, it would be wrong to do so in Germany, France, and any other modern country.

It is easy to continue expanding on the application of hegemony's logic. It dominates Lenin's arguments and perspectives on the proletariat as much as the peasantry. It is the totality of the masses which have an "unreasoning trust in the capitalists" because they are taught to do so by the bourgeoisie.³⁰ Lenin then argues they are consequently inclined to accept the ideas of the bourgeoisie and to give their power over to them.³¹ Thus, Lenin recognizes that there is a struggle for ideological leadership between the bourgeoisie and the socialists over the proletariat.³² As we know from our foundational definition, this means there is a struggle for hegemony. A struggle which again is not over the form of a bourgeois revolution, but over whether the revolution shall be bourgeois or socialist.

As with the peasantry, concern for the battle over leading the proletariat then persists into socialist governance. This may be immediately observed by Lenin's position amidst the trade union debate, in which he held firmly that the trade unions were a school of communism designed for education.³³ In this way, the trade unions serve as an organ of the party, one which is uniquely placed between

their dictatorship and the general masses.³⁴ Thus, we have Lenin's image of transmission belts between the vanguard, the advanced, and the general masses. Note Zinoviev's hegemony-focused alignment with Lenin here.³⁵

This, however, brings us to the reason for conceiving of these transmission belts: Lenin's belief in the need for such intermediaries. Such belts operate both ways and thus serve two functions. One direction comes from the masses to the vanguard, informing them of their needs and perspectives with regard to various social developments. This enables the leading party to be responsive to the masses and thus to earn the trust which Lenin spoke of in *The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution*. With this trust, the vanguard is able to transmit its own perspectives and views onto the masses.

In other words, the purpose of such things is to exercise ideological leadership over the proletariat or, as we now know such a phrase, to establish and exercise hegemony. This talk of transmission belts is thus precisely the same as Gramsci's remarks on the situation in Bologna. One may note Lenin's fixation on the oddities of the situation, such as when he emphasizes the trade union's separation from the state and its coercive apparatuses. Yet the role he gives to it is precisely that of Gramscian civil society, which we know from his simple formula is the domain of hegemony.

V. CONCLUSION

In order to make a decisive statement on the gap between Lenin and Plekhanov, it is necessary to conclude by addressing the supposed root of the latter's strategy. Closely attached to Lih's fundamental thesis—the Erfurtian nature of Lenin—is the claim that Plekhanov's strategy of hegemony was implicit to the principles established by Kautsky.³⁶ Whilst Plekhanov's hegemony scenario, or strategy as I have termed it, seems to be so, the decisive question becomes whether or not the same can be said of Lenin's universal theory. As I have said before, this depends on the application to the proletariat, socialist revolution, and post-revolutionary governance. Initially, it may appear so, for is it not the merger of socialism and the workers movement a matter of cultivating the transmission belts described by Lenin?³⁷

34 Lenin, "Trade Unions."

35 Lenin, "Trade Unions."

36 Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 155.

37 Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 42.

28 Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 22.

29 Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 4.

30 Vladimir Lenin, "The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution," in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Progress Publishers, 1964), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/tasks/index.htm>.

31 Lenin, "Tasks of the Proletariat."

32 Lenin, "Tasks of the Proletariat."

33 Vladimir Lenin, "Once Again On The Trade Unions, The Current Situation and the Mistakes of Trotsky and Bukharin," in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Progress Publishers, 1965), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/jan/25.htm>.



Lih's argument would oppose such an implication, but not necessarily on the account of hegemony and the proletariat, where one can say that both Lenin and Kautsky are simply refining terminology on concepts laid out by Marx. Rather, it is on the same matter which we might associate with Plekhanov's Menshevism: Arguing hegemony is just a matter of recognizing the need for proletarian leadership in the battle for democracy.³⁸ Hegemony is thus reduced to a mere solution to the problem of bourgeois inaction and deceit as Kautsky noted.³⁹

When one reviews the "implicit links" drawn on from Kautsky's *Parliamentarism and Democracy*, the reductive nature of this is cemented.⁴⁰ Political freedom is necessary to the eventual goal of socialism, the bourgeoisie seek to ignore or undermine this pursuit, thus the task falls to the revolutionary proletariat.⁴¹ I do not dispute this, so I do not object when Lih draws a link to Plekhanov's statements about the proletariat leading the battle against autocracy. However, it says nothing about the socialist revolution, where of course Plekhanov rejected connections to this strategy. It says nothing about the dynamics of the state and class rule. On such a matter, one substitutes implications for either silence or Plekhanov's concerns about skipping stages of development.

In other words, hegemony is confined purely as a means to the means to the end rather than a tool of social analysis. Pulling these details together, it becomes clear that Lenin had in fact gone far beyond Plekhanov's original formula or any implications informing it. Lenin was still concerned with the basic strategy of hegemony in the socialist revolution, while Plekhanov had abandoned it. Lenin was still concerned with it when reflecting on the tasks of governing even as Plekhanov worried over the need for Russia to undergo a bourgeois revolution in full first. And he was still concerned with its logic for all classes in relation to the party and other ideological schools, whereas Plekhanov confined himself to cross-class alliances and more traditional formulas for how to lead the proletariat.

Wherever Plekhanov saw a limited formula applying to Russia, Lenin saw a broader system of analysis inextricable from all of higher politics, the difference between a mere strategy and a theory of how societies work. When one remembers Lenin's concern with the masses' learned yet naive trust of the bourgeoisie, the universal application of this is reaffirmed. The suggestion by Lih that hegemony shifted from

an old "we can lead other classes!" to the modern "other classes can lead us!" makes no sense in such light.⁴² Nor does his surprise that Zinoviev applied it to the dictatorship of the proletariat because as Gramsci recognized by going back to the Jacobins, hegemony is a theory for all classes at all times.⁴³ Lenin's later conflicts with Plekhanov can be understood in his recognition of this fact and thus in the contribution of an original theory which breaks with Plekhanov and is independent of Kautsky's implications.

³⁸ Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 101.

³⁹ Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 100.

⁴⁰ Karl Kautsky, *Parliamentarism and Democracy in Karl Kautsky on Democracy and Republicanism* ed. and trans. Ben Lewis (Haymarket Books, 2019).

⁴¹ Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 98–99.

⁴² Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 110.

⁴³ Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 110.





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